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SUBJECT: MANAGED DEMOCRACY IN ACTION: ASTRAKHAN REGIONAL
ELECTION

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: In advance of October 8 regional elections, we visited Astrakhan Oblast and found:

- The Kremlin-backed United Russia party in the lead and expecting to gain a majority in the regional Duma;
 - A popular United Russia governor who touts his ability to use his contacts in the Kremlin to deliver for the region:
 - Billboards and paid TV ads from all parties, but United Russia dominance in TV news and newspaper coverage;
 - The Republican Party, in alliance with other liberal parties, hoping to reach the seven percent threshold, while overcoming a challenge to its registration;
 - Positive inter-ethnic relations despite a mixed population including over 25 percent Muslims;
 - Complaints about inadequate revenue sharing from Moscow.
- End Summary.

October 8 Regional Elections

12. (U) Astrakhan holds elections on October 8 for all 58 seats in the regional Duma. United Russia had a majority in the outgoing Duma, which had only 29 seats. Ten parties have registered for the election. These are: United Russia, Communists, LDPR, Rodina, Party of Pensioners, Republican Party, Peoples' Will, Democratic Party, People's Party and Patriots of Russia. During a September 19-21 visit, we met with regional Duma members, opposition party candidates, Vice Mayors, business people, students, and officials to get a sense of attitudes prior to the election.

United Russia in Driver's Seat

13. (SBU) Aleksandr Zhilkin, the incumbent governor of the Astrakhan region (oblast) was elected in 2004 -- one of the last elected before Putin initiated the change to a system of appointed governors. His term extends to 2008 so he will remain in office whatever the result of the October 8 election. Most with whom we spoke, even those from the opposition, were positive about Zhilkin, who heads United Russia for the region. Although he is not running for office himself, Zhilkin has dominated the campaign. United Russia

literature touts Zhilkin's ties with the Kremlin and his ability to use these ties to deliver for the region. Zhilkin promises to use the 450th anniversary of Russian rule in Astrakhan in 2008 as a hook to extract greater resources from Moscow.

¶4. (SBU) We met at the Duma with Astrakhan region Duma Vice Chairman Yakov Vinokurov of United Russia. Vinokurov explained that the appeal of United Russia in Astrakhan, as throughout Russia, is -- as its name implies -- its commitment keep Russia unified. To remain intact, Russia needs the "power vertical." Vinokurov noted that the party's message stresses the stability that the Putin era has brought -- and the economic growth that stems from it. Vinokurov underlined that the fundamental attraction of United Russia is rooted in a revulsion to the chaos of the 1990s. Vinokurov, like other United Russia supporters with whom we spoke, said that the party's goal is to get an absolute majority on October 8. He thought it was doable.

"Information Bandits"

¶5. (SBU) Communist Party Duma member Igor Negerev participated in our meeting with Vinokurov. Negerev was unsparing in his criticism of the "monopoly of power" of United Russia in the region. While he did not criticize Zhilkin personally, Negerev complained that United Russia dominated the news media and prevented the message of other parties from getting out. Negerev handed us a pile of the front pages from the last few weeks of the main regional newspaper and pointed out that the lead story every day was about Zhilkin -- complete with photo. The same was true of TV which, he said, leads every night with favorable stories on the governor's activities. Negerev accused United Russia of being "information bandits." He also alleged that United Russia sympathizers had destroyed Communist Party campaign billboards and posters. Negerev passed us pictures of youth

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ripping down posters. He also passed us court documents in which he had formalized his complaints. In addition, Negerev showed us photos of government vehicles with United Russia bumper stickers on them -- another issue he had raised with the courts.

¶6. (SBU) Negerev declared that if information flow were fair, the Communist Party might get 25 percent of the vote on October 8 and run even with United Russia. Negerev said that in campaigning he stressed that United Russia was the party of insider deals and corruption and that it was the Communist party that represented the interests of average people and small business. Negerev continued that United Russia members' main concern was using their influence to get as rich as they can as fast as they can. Vinokurov took on Negerev on several points and the two proceeded to have a heated debate in front of us.

Liberals Hope to Make a Showing

¶7. (SBU) We met with State Duma member Valeriy Zubov of the Republican Party, who was in Astrakhan to boost the party's profile in advance of the elections. We also met separately with the leader of the regional Yabloko party, Vadim Munen. Of the liberal parties, only the Republican party is running in Astrakhan -- with the endorsement of Yabloko and of the Union of Right Forces (SPS).

¶8. (SBU) Zubov said United Russia (YR) would certainly win the election -- the only question was by how much. He expected YR to get about 40 percent. As for the Republican Party, Zubov told us that polls indicated it might cross the seven percent threshold and get its block into the regional Duma. Both Zubov and Munen agreed with Communist Deputy Negerev that United Russia used its control of the

governorship and media to monopolize news coverage. Nonetheless Zubov said he expected no outright fraud at the polls. Despite United Russia's advantages, Zubov said the Republicans wanted to compete. He noted that if the Republican party got seven percent in Astrakhan it would be a major boost to the party on the national level and encourage the liberal parties to unite. Of the nine regions having elections October 8, the Republican party is competing only in Astrakhan.

¶9. (SBU) However, the Republican party has concerns about its registration. Zubov followed up with us in Moscow on September 27 and said that he believed United Russia/the Kremlin was using a party that was not even actively campaigning -- the Democratic party -- to challenge the Republican Party's registration in Astrakhan. The grounds for the challenge was that the Republican Party on the national level is not properly registered so authorities should strike its Astrakhan affiliate from the ballot. We followed up with the Astrakhan election commission October 4 and were told that the Republican Party remained registered.

¶10. (SBU) Zubov told us that the Republican Party was trying to appeal to voters who reject the "vertical of power." He said Republicans favor more power devolving to the regional and local levels. They also emphasize the need for greater transparency in government and for fighting corruption. Zubov predicted a weak showing by the Communists and LDPR but that they would make the threshold. He also thought the Pensioners Party might make it.

Electoral Commission

¶11. (SBU) We met with Yevgeniy Povrovskiy, chairman of the Astrakhan Electoral Commission. Asked about United Russia's dominance on the news, Povrovskiy contended that it was only natural that the media would pay close attention to the governor's activities. The governor just happened, in this case, to be from United Russia. Povrovskiy underlined that all registered parties were free to run paid advertisements following the news. This was not expensive. We watched these adds several times - a series of ten-second spots that featured the range of parties. Povrovskiy noted that there was no state-sponsored system for debates.

¶12. (SBU) Povrovskiy added that he was on the lookout for election irregularities such as the vandalism described by the Communists. He noted that some groups, whom he did not specify, practiced "Black PR." This involves, among other things, spreading false rumors about candidates. We asked

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about projected turnout. Povrovskiy said that in previous elections, turnout had been around 45 percent. A turnout of 50 percent on October 8 would be high, he said.

Registration Service

¶13. (SBU) We were warmly received by the head of the Federal Registration Service, Tatiana Belova, and her staff. Belova confirmed that ten parties had registered for the elections. She reviewed the process, which involves submitting lists of at least 250 paying party members, outlining the party platform and sources of financing, and paying a small fee.

¶14. (SBU) Belova's office also does registration under the new NGO law, so we took the opportunity to inquire how that was proceeding. Belova informed us that she had increased staff by six persons to handle the added load from NGO registration. She knew of no foreign NGOs in Astrakhan. She defended the NGO law, stating that its goal was simply to make sure that NGOs did what they claimed to be doing. The state needed to make sure, she said, that NGOs were not fronts for criminal or terrorist activity. She claimed that

there was no outcry against the law in Astrakhan and that NGOs did not feel oppressed by it.

Revenue Sharing: Seeking More from Moscow

¶15. (SBU) We met with Astrakhan Deputy Mayors Marat Abdulkhalikov and Yevgeniy Aptekar, both affiliated with United Russia. They stressed, as did others from the regional government, that inadequate revenue sharing from Moscow was a major issue. They told us that the percentage of central government support for the city budget had dropped from 52 percent to 29 percent in the last three years. Related to this was the "vertical of taxation." Gazprom and Lukoil, by far the biggest companies in the region, were sending the bulk of tax revenue from their operation in Astrakhan to Moscow. Four years ago, the local cut had been significantly higher.

¶16. (SBU) Valeriy Bocharinkov, an advisor to Governor Khilkin told us that the governor had made increasing Astrakhan's take from Moscow his top priority. He travels frequently to Moscow to make his case, meeting with such figures as Putin and United Russia leader Gryzlov. Bocharinkov stressed that the Governor would use Astrakhan's 450th anniversary in 2008 as a hook to get more funds. The celebration will bring high-level attention to Astrakhan and hopefully generate investment in a range of infrastructure projects.

Inter-ethnic Relations

¶17. (SBU) Astrakhan is, by most estimates, 25-30 percent Muslim, mostly Kazakh or from the Caucasus. Our interlocutors universally said that relations between ethnic groups were good. They attributed this to the fact that the groups had a long history together -- recent immigration is less of an issue. Our contacts told us that nationalist parties, like Rodina, are not making ethnic appeals an issue in their Astrakhan campaign. Following our trip, we learned of an act of vandalism against a synagogue in late September. We contacted State Duma member Zybov, who downplayed it as non-representative.

Outreach

¶18. (SBU) We gave a talk on US-Russian relations to about sixty students at the University. The students were overwhelmingly apathetic about the election. The prevailing view was that United Russia would win no matter what, so the elections did not matter. One student said that if she voted she would vote for "none of the above"; others nodded in agreement. We also met with fifteen business people at the local business association. The business leaders were also cynical about the election and did not expect much to change. They were generally supportive of United Russia. Most dismissed the liberal parties as having weak leadership.

Comment

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¶19. (SBU) The election in Astrakhan is a case of managed democracy in action. United Russia has clear advantages -- media and patronage -- and is using them relentlessly. Nonetheless, other parties are competing and a campaign of sorts is underway. While the Republican Party feared being de-registered, this appears not to have happened, maintaining that choice for the voters. United Russia's claim that it delivers and represents stability clearly resonates. How much United Russia wins by will be the lead story. There are also other issues in play -- such as how strong the

Communists, Rodina and LDPR show themselves to be. If the
Republicans pass the threshold, it may inspire other liberal
parties to unite for the 2007-8 national elections.
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